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ABSTRACT

An examination of Paulo Freire's educational pedagogy reveals a belief in education as a subversive force, where schools are the agent of change. In Freire's theories of liberatory education, education should open minds to higher stages of consciousness rather than just deposit information for future use, for knowledge emerges only through invention and inquiry. While one of the criticisms of Freire is that his methods are too abstract, it must be realized that his pedagogy is designed on very basic assumptions and political realities. People read and write what they understand and what is relevant to their lives. By learning new words and new social-political realities, consciousness and literacy are both increased. Participatory methods and the encouragement of critical thinking results in a rigorous, but not rigid, pedagogy that is democratic in approach. Educational problems such as the gifted underachiever or teacher burnout can be effectively addressed through Freire's work. Six references are included. (PPB)

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Paulo Freire: The Man and His Educational Theory

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Abstract

This report examines the life experience of Paulo Freire and its impact on his progressive educational theory. The use of dialectic, liberatory pedagogy is explained. As a living theorist, Dr. Freire's work is still evolving. The current applications of his pedagogy are highlighted.

Paulo Freire: The Man and His Educational Theory

This report examines the life experiences of Paulo Freire and the impact it had on his progressive educational theory. As a living theorist, Freire's work is still evolving. Current application of his pedagogy is highlighted.

Paulo Freire was born in Recife, in northeastern Brazil, in 1921. His parents provided a middle class home for the family. In 1930, the economy drastically changed and poverty hit Recife. The Freire family became impoverished. Food was in short supply. Paulo, the elementary student, suffered from malnutrition. As a result, he fell two years behind in his studies. After the economic crisis passed, he was able to improve his academic standing in school (Harmon, 1975).

Freire attended the University of Recife to study law and philosophy. He received his doctorate in 1959. After graduation, he became a labor union lawyer. The industrial revolution was having an impact on the village. Freire saw the opportunity for change from a feudal to a democratic society. In 1963 he conceived the Conscientizacao, a government sanctioned adult method of attaining literacy. He led discussion

circles with themes of democracy and literacy (Harmon, 1975).

One year later, in 1964, a military coup disrupted Freire's literacy campaign. The new government suppressed the program, calling it subversive (Freire, 1971). Freire was imprisoned for 70 days for his efforts to raise the consciousness of the peasants. He was "invited to leave the country" (Freire, 1971, p.18). Freire, his wife, and five children moved to Chile. There he worked for Unesco, doing literacy training with farm workers. He completed a book that was started in the Brazilian prison entitled Educacao Como Practica Liberdade (Friere, 1968). These writings were sociological reflections on society in transition (Freire, 1971).

In 1968, Freire wrote the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, in Portugese. Repeated themes of education and liberation were to become associated with this theorist. He advocated cultural revolution through literacy. In 1969, Freire was invited to Harvard University, in Massachusetts, as a visiting scholar. In 1975, he became an educational consultant for the World Council of Churches, in Geneva (Harmon, 1975). Dr. Freire is currently living in Brazil and continues

to travel throughout the world lecturing on liberatory education.

Freire, while at the University of Recife, had read the works of Sartre, Mao, Fromm, Martin Luther King, Guevara, Marx and Dewey (Harmon, 1975). These progressive and radical philosophers impacted on Freire's pedagogy. Freire (1971) wrote: "Education is once again a subversive force" (p.9). He believed that making peasants literate and causing them to critically review their lives will lead to change. He saw the relevance of his work not only in the Third World, but in the United States as well. The rebellion of the 1960's of middle class youth, and the awakening of black people as to their role in society, were examples for Freire of critical thinking for social change.

Freire's educational pedagogy involves a dialectic approach. He believes that people need to be able to label their world, assess it, and then act as an agent to change it (Freire, 1971). Common educational practices, according to the theorist, are dehumanizing. It oppresses students by not allowing them to interact with the material (Harmon, 1975). Schools should be the agent of change, instead of the producers of the

problems. Systems that use "banking of education" methods instead of an exploratory approach, as Dewey expressed, turn students off to learning. Freire (1971) feels education should "open minds to higher stages of consciousness" (p.36) rather than just to deposit information for future use. The solution, according to the theorist, is praxis. It is his theory and action plan. Praxis involves analysis, discussion, and action to change a situation; to create a new situation; and for true learning to occur (Harmon, 1975).

In his theories of liberatory education, the oppressor becomes changed, as well as the oppressed. This theme appeared in the writings of Mao also. Teachers and students in the practice of Freire's liberating education theory, recreate knowledge together. It is a total, humanistic commitment to the learning process. Freire (1971) writes: "education is suffering from narration sickness" (p.57). He refers to the typical classroom environment as the narrating subject, meaning the teacher; and the listening objects, namely the students; and the contents as lifeless and petrified. Like Dewey, Freire believes that knowledge emerges through invention and inquiry.

Reality becomes a process that is constantly undergoing transformation in a liberatory classroom. Freire (1971) seeks to "reduce the distance between the teacher and the taught" (p.63).

If we reduce the banking method of teaching we can increase the usage of problem posing techniques. This is a means of involving students in their own learning. The vehicle by which this is accomplished is dialogue. Students become critical co-investigators. Learning and the curriculum evolves in the classroom. The teacher may present the material, but the class modifies it through the dialogue. Problem posing education is a constant unraveling of the subject matter under investigation. The naming and labeling of reality is crucial in Freire's pedagogy for awareness and critical thinking (Freire, 1971). It helps students to define their world.

One criticism of Freire mentioned by professionals is that his concepts are abstract. Critics feel a formal system does not exist for others to follow. On the contrary, Freire's steps to obtaining literacy are clearly outlined in his pedagogy as follows:

1. Study the jargon of the student
2. Identify a theme of interest

3. Identify generative words (emotionally charged and cultural)
4. Divide generative words into syllables
5. Build new words from above syllables
6. Codification (pictures and stories using words and themes)
7. Culture circles for dialogue
8. Learn new words and their social-political reality
9. Results are increased consciousness and literacy levels

(Harmon, 1975, p.53-59).

Simply stated, based on the above pedagogy, one reads and writes what one understands and is relevant in their life.

In relation to the young child, Freire feels that the task of pedagogy is to make children aware of the abilities they have to learn. Children learn through interaction with their environment. They learn by asking questions, through problem posing, not just problem solving. Exploration with the use of dialogue is a natural process for children. Ira Shor (1987) refers to this process as situated pedagogy. "Passivity is an unnatural condition of childhood" (Shor & Freire, 1987, p.123).

Another criticism of Freire and other progressive theorists is that the basics of a subject are not taught. They feel that the foundations of classic core curricula are missing. The writer has not found this to be the case. The basis foundations to all subject areas are maintained, however, the class re-creates the origins of the core material. This re-creation of a subject produces more effective and more retentive learners (Shor & Freire, 1987). The praxis, or methodology, allows for critical thought to emerge. Often the teacher-leader will divide the larger class into smaller working groups. A question is posed that the smaller groups try to answer. They reconvene in the larger group to critically examine the problem. This is a participatory pedagogy (Shor & Freire, 1987). The method is far from lax, permissive, or undirected. On the contrary, it is actually rigorous, but without being rigid. It is a democratic approach, but within the limits set by the pedagogy. The teacher acts as the facilitator of learning, rather than the disseminator of information (Jordan & Streets, 1973). Freire (1987) writes: "I am not against a curriculum or program, I am against the authoritarian and elitist way of organizing the studies" (p.107).

In reading the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1971), the sexist language in Freire's writing became obvious. The theorist referred to "men" repeatedly in his discussion of freedom through liberated education. Freire has come under repeated criticism for the use of sexist language. Due to the many letters from women researchers, Freire has allowed his works to be cited in non-sexist language (Frankenstein, 1981). His speeches and writings of the late 1970's and 1980's are more sensitive to this problem.

Interestingly, an application of Freire's work involves the teaching of women's issues. Schneiderwind and Davidson are two recent writers on opening minds to issues of equality, racism, and sexism through liberated pedagogy (Shor, personal communication, October 5, 1988). Sweeney also uses Freire's theories in an elementary education classroom in the northeast, to teach children about human rights, multicultural curricula, and women's issues. Sweeney uses "congruent dialectic theories of exploratory learning, along with Freire's pedagogy" (Sweeney, personal communication, October 15, 1988).

Additional application of Freire's pedagogy has involved bilingual, English as a Second Language

courses. The methodology outlined previously is usually applied with foreign speaking students. Wallerstein is a practitioner currently applying Freire's work with E.S.L. students (Shor, 1987).

Teacher education courses at universities can also benefit from liberatory education. Ira Shor writes of using the method of participatory learning to mobilize critical thought in future teachers. Dr. Shor also mentions that the dialectic pedagogy has also been successful in alcohol abuse and prevention programs (Shor, 1987).

The book A Pedagogy for Liberation (Shor & Freire, 1987) is a dialectic writing application itself. It is a living,, talking application of Freire's methodology, to enable the learner to better understand his system. Shor and Freire recorded their dialectic discourse and transcribed it into a book. This allowed the reader to participate in the dialectic experience.

Shor (1987) writes of the gifted underachiever. This is the bored, rebellious, creative student who is turned off in today's American school system. For this student, he contends, a liberated interactive pedagogy might be the answer. These students need to feel the relevancy of the curriculum to their lives. When we

speak to students about their reality, they become animated and alert (ie. their music). When they are asked to regurgitate facts, they often become lifeless.

Shor reports that this pedagogy does not always work. He is currently teaching English at Staten Island College in New York. "Each group is different and some are more resistant to the dialectic approach" (Shor, personal communication, October 15, 1988). He feels successful if he can at least cause the student to think critically. Dr. Shor has students writing some of the exam questions as a problem posing technique.

The problem of teacher burn-out can be addressed through Freire's work. A dialogue might be refreshing for the burnt-out teacher, instead of a repressive lecture format (Shor & Freire, 1987). Frankenstein (1983) also writes of teacher burn-out as a result of the frustrations of teaching in an oppressive educational system. The author solved her stress problem by teaching Math and Statistics with Freire's pedagogy. She explains that education is political. Statistics are socially manipulated by the way in which they are reported and interpreted. This theme appears in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed (Freire,

1971). Frankenstein also feels that math anxiety can be reduced through dialogue.

Although Freire began his work with adult literacy (andragogy), his work is relevant with children as well (pedagogy). In most learning environments, a liberated, dialectic, interactive pedagogy can be applied.

Dr. Freire is currently living in Brazil and practicing liberatory education at the university. He will be speaking this spring (1989), in Washington, D.C. (Shor, personal communication, October 5, 1988).

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Author's Notes

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1. I. Shor (personal communication, October 5, 1988).
2. M. Sweeney (personal communication, October 15, 1988).